

POLIO EPIDEMIC IN LOUISVILLE

The 1918 Influenza Pandemic wasn't the only time Louisville faced a major disease epidemic. In 1946 and 1947, a polio outbreak swept Colorado – including Denver and the Boulder area. At the time, polio was often referred to as "infantile paralysis" and for good reason. Children were especially vulnerable to polio. Much like COVID-19 today, the risks associated with polio were not the same for everyone: the danger one faced depended on your age. Worse still, severe cases of polio could lead to lifelong paralysis – think of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt – or even death.

LOCAL REACTIONS

As polio cases rose in 1946, city officials in Louisville employed many of the same strategies we see today:

- Local papers reminded readers to wash their hands thoroughly and to practice good hygiene
- Anyone displaying symptoms was either encouraged to stay in quarantine or rushed to the hospital
- Public gatherings were limited -Louisville canceled its Labor Day parade that year
- Regional theaters stopped showing children's movies.
- The City of Louisville cut back its youth programs
- Colorado delayed school openings statewide in August of 1946

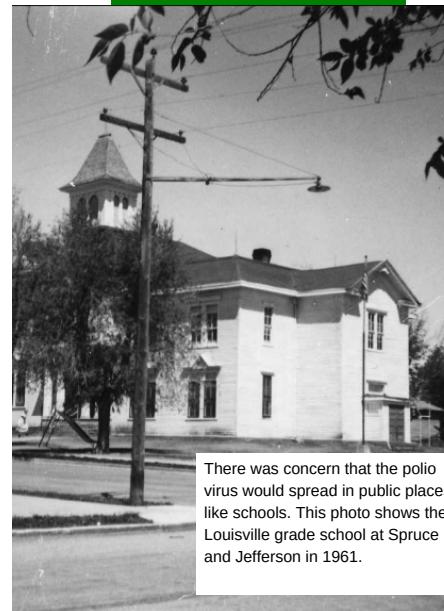
These reactions were warranted: several Louisville families were still reeling from an outbreak the year before that left six local children stricken with the disease. The precautions also seemed to work, in 1946 not a single Louisville child contracted polio while cases grew in the surrounding towns.

FURTHER READING

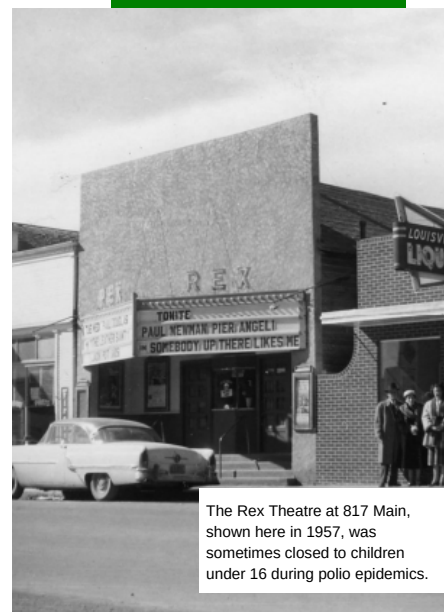
"Polio Epidemics Cast a Cloud on Summer Fun," *Louisville Historian* (2012).



Louisville Junior High students in the 1940s. Young people such as these were especially susceptible to the polio virus.



There was concern that the polio virus would spread in public places, like schools. This photo shows the Louisville grade school at Spruce and Jefferson in 1961.



The Rex Theatre at 817 Main, shown here in 1957, was sometimes closed to children under 16 during polio epidemics.